

ARMISTEAD MAUPIN

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SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

*"His most skillful balancing act yet."
— Los Angeles Times Book Review*

Volume Five in the TALES OF THE CITY Series

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

ARMISTEAD MAUPIN



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“Its good-natured knack for making you laugh out loud would be reason enough to recommend

Significant Others; but aside from that, it is wise, compassionate, irreverent and painfully of the moment.”

The Independent (London)

“A portrait of the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic that achieves an intimacy that could scarcely be duplicated in any other format. While this hardly sounds like material for romantic comedy—miraculously, it is.”

Publishers Weekly

“Maupin’s ear for dialogue is as acute as his feeling for characterization, and the net result is as engaging a read as you are likely to encounter in many moons.”

The Times (London)

“Like those of Dickens and Wilkie Collins, Armistead Maupin’s novels have all appeared originally as serials.

It is the strength of this approach, with its fantastic adventures and astonishingly contrived coincidences, that makes these novels charming and compelling. Everything is explained and everything tied up and nothing is lost by reading them individually. There is no need even to read them chronologically.”

Literary Review

NOVELS BY ARMISTEAD MAUPIN

Tales of the City

More Tales of the City

Further Tales of the City

Babycakes

Significant Others

Sure of You

*F*or Terry Anderson,
who took his time getting here

*For Jane Stuart Maupin,
who has been there all along*

compress: to force (a substance) into less space;
n a small thick mass of cloth pressed
to part of the body.

NOTE TO THE READER

or customary ^{one or more ceremonial} acts which are often repeated in the same form.

The Bohemian Grove is a real place whose rituals I have compressed, though not substantially altered, to suit the time frame of this tale.

Wimminwood is a fictitious entity based on the actual practices of women's music festivals in Michigan, California, Georgia and elsewhere.

I am indebted to my friends in both camps.

A.M.

*If you go down in the woods today
You'd better not go alone.
It's lovely down in the woods today
But safer to stay at home.
For every Bear that ever there was
Will gather there for certain because
Today's the day the Teddy Bears
have their picnic.*

CHILDREN'S SONG, 1907

describes the process of going down
to say what something is like.
to give a picture of in words.

Descent into Heaven

as an

BRIAN'S INTERNAL CLOCK ALMOST ALWAYS WOKE HIM at four fifty-six, giving him four whole minutes to luxuriate in the naked human body next to him. Then the Braun alarm clock on the nightstand would activate his wife with its genteel Nazi tootling, and her morning marathon would begin.

Today, with three minutes to go, he slipped his arm around her waist and eased her closer until her back had once again settled against his chest. It was risky, this part, because sometimes she would jerk awake with a start, as if frightened by a stranger.

He pressed his face against her neck, then traced with his forefinger the shallow swirl of her navel. It was smooth and hard now, miraculously aerobicized into a tiny pink seashell. She stirred slightly, so he flattened his hand to keep from tickling her and made sure their breathing was still in sync.

At the two-minute mark, he eased his knee between her legs and tightened his grip around her waist. She groaned faintly, then cleared her throat, so he let his hand fall slack against her belly. She countered by squeezing his knee with her thighs, telling him not to worry, he wasn't smothering

formula
correct
working
arrangement

her, she needed this time as much as he did.

The French had it wrong about *le petit mort*. If you asked him, "the little death" was not so much the slump after sex as these few piquant moments of serious cuddling before the demands of Mary Ann's career sent her vaulting over his piss-hardened manhood in the direction of the toilet and the coffee machine.

Another Nazi, that coffee machine. Even now, as he longed her navel again, it was grinding its beans in the kitchen. The sound of it caused her to shift slightly and clear her throat again. "Like that?" she asked.

"What?"

"My belly button."

"Mmm."

"Took seven hundred hours," she said. "I figured it out."

He chuckled at the tyranny of numbers that governed her existence. *Everything has a price*, she was telling him. It was her favorite theme these days.

She rolled over in his arms and poked her finger into his navel. "Hey," he muttered, uncertain whether the gesture was one of affection or reprimand. She wiggled her finger. "Watch out," he said. "You fall in there and we'll have to organize a search party."

He waited for a faint cry of protest but none came. A half-assed "Come off it" would have sufficed, but all she did was remove her finger and prop herself up on one elbow. "Well," she said, "I guess I'm up."

He knew better than to argue with this pronouncement. He would only receive the standard recitation of her crypto-fascist morning regimen. *Aerobics at six. A bowl of bran at seven. A meeting with the producer at seven-thirty. Makeup session at eight. A meeting with staff and crew from nine to nine-fifteen, followed by promo shots for the next day's show and a session in the green room with this morning's guest celebrities. Life was a ballbuster for San Francisco's most famous talk-show hostess.*

"So what's the topic today?" he asked.

"Fat models," she replied.

“Huh?”

“You know. Those porkos who model for the big-and-beautiful fashions.”

“Oh.”

“It’s a huge racket.” She laughed. “Pardon the pun.” She bounded over him and swung her legs off the bed, yawning noisily. “The book’s on the dresser if you wanna take a look at it.”

As she headed for the bathroom, he brooded momentarily about the extra ten pounds around his waist, then got up and went to the dresser, returning to bed with the book. He switched on the bedside light and examined the cover. It was called *Larger than Life: Confessions of the World’s Most Beautiful Fat Woman*. By Wren Douglas.

A glamorous star-filtered cover photograph seemed to confirm the claim. The woman was big, all right, but her face was the face of a goddess; full red lips, a perfect nose, enormous green eyes fairly brimming with kindness and invitation. Her raven hair framed it all perfectly, cascading across her shoulders toward a cleavage rivaling the San Andreas Fault.

“What is this?” Mary Ann was brandishing the roll of paper towels he had left in the bathroom the night before.

“We ran out of toilet paper,” he said, shrugging. He could do without her rhetorical questions at five o’clock in the morning.

The alarm sounded.

“Fuck off,” he barked, not to her but to the clock, which deactivated obediently at the sound of his voice.

Mary Ann groaned and lowered the roll of towels, banging it angrily against her leg. “I specifically told Nguyet to make sure we had enough to—”

“I’ll tell her,” he put in. “She understands me better.” She also liked him better, but he wasn’t about to say so. He’d shared a special rapport with the Vietnamese maid ever since he’d discovered she couldn’t tell the difference between Raid and Pledge. His pact of silence about the incident seemed the very least he could do for a woman whose uncle had been

killed in an American bombing run over the Mekong Delta.

"It's just a language problem," he added. "She's getting much better. Really."

Mary Ann sighed and returned to the bathroom.

He raised his voice so she could hear him. "Paper towels won't kill you. Think of it as a learning experience."

"Right," she muttered back.

"Maybe there's a show in it," he offered, trying to sound playful. "A dreaded new medical condition. Like . . . the heartbreak of Bounty butt."

She didn't laugh.

He thought for a moment, then said: "Viva vulva?"

"Go to sleep," she told him. "You're gonna wake up Shawna."

He knew what she was doing in there. She was reading *USA Today*, briefing herself for the show, learning a little about a lot to keep from seeming stupid on the air.

He picked up the book again and studied the face of the world's most beautiful fat woman. Then he switched off the light, burrowed under the comforter, and slipped almost instantly into sleep.

He dreamed about a woman who had tits the size of watermelons.

The next time he woke, his daughter was conducting a Rambo-style maneuver on his exposed left leg, propelling a green plastic tank up his thigh in an apparent effort to gain supremacy of the hillocks that lay beyond. Shawna invariably chose some sort of guerrilla theater over the simple expediency of saying, "Get up, Daddy."

He remained on his stomach and made a cartoon-monster noise into the pillow.

Shawna shrieked delightedly, dropping the tank between his legs. He rolled over and snatched her up with one arm, tumbling her onto the bed. "Is this my little Puppy? Yum-yum. Puppy Monster eats little puppies for breakfast!"

He wasn't sure how this Puppy business had begun, but he

and Mary Ann both made use of the nickname. In light of Mary Ann's distaste for the child's given name, maybe it was simply their way of avoiding the issue without being disrespectful to the dead.

Connie, after all, had named the little girl, and Connie had died giving birth to her. They couldn't just choose a new name the way people do when their pets change hands.

Was that what "Puppy" really meant? Something that wasn't theirs? Something they had picked out at the pound? Would the nickname hurt Shawna's feelings when she was old enough to consider its implications?

He seized his daughter's waist and held her aloft, airplane fashion.

The little girl spread her arms and squealed.

He rocked forward, causing her to soar for a moment, but his butt made a graceless landing on the toy tank.

"Goddamnit, Puppy. Mommy didn't buy that, did she?"

She managed to keep a poker face, still impersonating an airplane.

He lowered her to the bed and reached under him for the offending war machinery. "It's Jeremy's isn't it? You've been trading again."

The kid wasn't talking.

"I didn't buy it, and Mommy didn't buy it, and I know you don't take things that don't belong to you."

She shook her head, then said: "I'm hungry."

"Don't change the subject, young lady."

Shawna sat on the edge of the bed and let her head dangle in a loose semicircle. The little charlatan was condescending to cute as a last resort.

"What did you trade for it?" he asked.

Her answer was unintelligible.

"What?"

"My *Preemie*," she said.

She slid off the bed, hitting the expensive new carpet with a soft thud. "My Cabbage Patch *Preemie*." Her tone indicated that this was a matter of simple *laissez-faire* economics and none of his goddamn business.

He felt a vague responsibility to be angry, but he couldn't

help smiling at the inevitable scene in the condo across the hallway: Cap Sorenson, the ultimate Reaganite, returning home after a hard day of software and racketball, only to come upon Daddy's little soldier playing mommy to a premature Cabbage Patch doll.

Shawna tugged on his arm. "Dad-dee . . . c'mon!"

He checked the clock. Seven thirty-seven. "O.K., Puppy, go pick out a tape." This was his usual ploy to get her out of the room while he pulled on his bathrobe. It was no big deal to him, but Mary Ann thought it "inadvisable" that he walk around naked in front of Shawna. And Mary Ann should know; she was the one with the talk show.

"No," said Shawna.

"What do you mean, no?"

"No VCR. Go see Anna."

"We'll do that, Puppy, but not yet. Anna's asleep. Go on now . . . pick out a tape. Mommy brought you *Pete the Dragon* and *Popeye*, and I think there's—"

A whine welled up in the child. She pawed the carpet belligerently, cutting a silvery path through the powder-blue plush. He couldn't help wondering if parenting was an age-related skill like warfare—tolerable, even stimulating, at twenty, but inescapably futile at forty.

He looked his daughter in the eye and spoke her name—her given name—to signal his seriousness. "I want you to go pick out a tape before Daddy gets unbelievably mad at you. We'll go see Anna later on."

Shawna's lower lip plumped momentarily, but she obeyed him. When she was gone, he dragged himself to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. The floor was still wet from Mary Ann's frantic ablutions, so he mopped it with a damp towel and tossed the towel into the laundry hamper.

He hesitated before weighing himself, then decided that the ugly truth was a surefire antidote for his late-night jelly doughnut binges. The scales surprised him, however. He had lost four pounds in four days.

This made no sense to him, but he had never been one to argue with serendipity.

Shawna threw her usual tantrum over breakfast. This time her yogurt was the wrong color and there wasn't enough Perrier to make her cranberry juice "go fizzy." Would she ever tire of testing him?

After breakfast, according to custom, he let her pick out her clothes for the day. She chose a green cotton turtleneck with ladybugs on the arm and a pair of absurdly miniature 501's. He dressed her, then left her in the custody of Robin Williams and the VCR while he changed into his own version of her ensemble.

The clock said eight forty-six when he went to the window and peered down twenty-three stories into the leafy green canyon of Barbary Lane. From this height, Anna Madrigal's courtyard was nothing more than a terra-cotta postage stamp, but he could still discern a figure moving jauntily along the perimeter.

The landlady was making her morning sweep, brandishing a broom so vigorously that the ritual seemed more akin to exercise than to practical considerations of cleanliness. Later, she would cross the postage stamp diagonally and sit on the bench next to the azalea bed. For all her professed free-spiritedness, she was a creature of blatant predictability.

He lifted his gaze from the courtyard and surveyed their vista, a boundless sweep of city, bay and sky stretching from Mount Diablo to Angel Island and beyond.

There were no chimney pots or eucalyptus branches blocking their vision, no unsightly back stairwells or rocky rises framing some half-assed little chunk of water. What they had at The Summit was a goddamn *view*—as slick and unblemished as a photomural.

And just about as real.

Sometimes, when he stared at the horizon long enough, their teal-and-gray living room lost its identity altogether and became the boardroom of a corporate jet dipping its wings in homage to the Bank of America building.

Today, the sky was cloudless and the air was clear. No hint of the holocaust raging sixty miles south of the city. There, amid the brittle manzanita brush of the Santa Cruz Mountains, a jagged trail of fire seven miles wide had already blackened fifteen thousand acres and driven five thousand people from their homes.

But not here at The Summit. Nature wouldn't stand a chance at The Summit.

He sometimes wondered about that preposition. Should he tell people he lived *at* The Summit, *in* The Summit or *on* The Summit? Usually, when pressed, he admitted to 999 Green and left it at that.

If he was embarrassed, he had every right to be. He'd lived in the shadow of this concrete leviathan for nearly eight years, cursing it continually. Now, at his wife's insistence—and using his wife's money—he'd joined the enemy in a big way.

They had done it for Shawna. And for security. And because they needed a tax shelter. They had also done it because Mary Ann wanted a glossier setting for her "lifestyle" (God help her, she had actually used that word) than could ever be provided by the funky old bear of a building at 28 Barbary Lane.

Mrs. Madrigal had taken it well, but Brian knew she'd been hurt by their departure. At the very least, her sense of family had been violated. Even now, five months after their ascension, their old apartment on the lane remained empty and unrented, as if something had died there.

Maybe something had.

Life was different now; he knew that. The guy who had once waited tables at Perry's bore scant resemblance to this new and improved postmodern version of Brian Hawkins.

The new Brian drove a twenty-thousand-dollar Jeep. He owned three tuxedos and a mink-lined bomber jacket from Wilkes (which he wore only while driving the Jeep). Something of a fixture at Pier 23, he knew how to do lunch with the best of them.

When the new Brian went to parties, he usually ended up making man talk with the mayor's husband or Danielle Steel's husband—and once even with Geraldine Ferraro's husband.

O.K. He was a consort.

But even that took skill, didn't it?

And who was to say he didn't rank among the best?

When Shawna grew bored with television, he helped her into a windbreaker and briefed her for the trek to Barbary Lane. His basic requirements were two: Don't scream bloody murder on the elevator, and don't point at the doorman and yell "Mr. T!"

She did as she was told, miraculously enough, and they reached Green Street without a hitch. As they trooped along the crest of Russian Hill, his limbs felt curiously leaden; his temples pulsed a little, threatening a headache.

If this was the flu, he didn't need it. There were four major events in the next week alone.

Shawna insisted on being carried in his arms as they descended the steepest slope of Leavenworth, but she squirmed her way to the ground again as soon as they reached the rickety wooden stairs leading to Barbary Lane.

"Anna steps," she said, already recognizing the boundaries of another duchy. The lane, after all, belonged to Mrs. Madrigal. Even the grownups knew that.

There was a bulletin on the landing that confirmed the landlady's sovereignty: *SAVE THE BARBARY STEPS—Insensitive city officials have plans to replace our beloved wooden steps with hideous concrete ones. Now is the time to speak up. Contact Anna Madrigal, 28 Barbary Lane.*

Damn right, he thought. Give 'em hell, Anna.

Nevertheless, he took Shawna's hand as the beloved rotting planks creaked ominously beneath their tread. At the top, where the ground bristled with a stubble of dry fennel, he let her go and watched as she pranced between the garbage cans into the musky gloom of the eucalyptus trees. She looked like a child heading home.